FEBS 26559 FEBS Letters 528 (2002) 1–2
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Editorial

The European Union Sixth Framework Programme (FP6): where we stand and what are the implications of the consultation process

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First published online 5 September 2002

As you may be one of the many scientists who submitted an Expression of Interest (EoI) to FP6 you must be wondering what has happened since June 7, the deadline for submissions. What follows below is a brief personal account of the consultation process viewed from my participation as a reviewer in two of the assessment panels within priority theme I, 'Genomics and biotechnology for health', in area 1.1.1.1 'Fundamental knowledge, and basic tools for functional genomics in all organisms'.

The consultation process

The Commission received about 15 000 EoIs, of which 3000 were for the life sciences. The number was much larger than expected, underlining the enormous interest in the scientific community to actively contribute to the establishment of the European Research Area (ERA) – a vision championed by Commissioner Philippe Busquin and endorsed by the member countries.

By consulting the scientific community at large, the Commission wished to identify priority subjects/topics that were ready for research action using the New Instruments (Integrated Projects, IPs, and Networks of Excellence, NoEs), and to avoid the high degree of oversubscription that characterised previous FPs.

The review process of the 500 or so EoIs within area 1.1.1.1 was carried out by four panels of expert reviewers who assisted the Commission in (1) identifying key research subject/topics, (2) assessing the readiness of the scientific community to submit actions in these areas through the new instruments, (3) evaluating the European dimension and competitiveness of such initiatives, and finally (4) defining the scope of the first call for proposals.

Each panel consisted of about 15 experts, who as a whole covered a broad range of expertise in the areas in question. Each reviewer received 100 EoIs for assessing at home, and was requested to submit a list of the 15 best EoIs prior to a 2-day meeting in Brussels. All the best EoIs were then compiled by the Commission to provide a list of citations that formed the basis for discussions leading to the selection of priority subjects/topics that were mature for action. A member of the Commission chaired the session, and each of the experts acted as rapporteurs for six or seven EoIs.

To place the results in the overall context, the review group was presented with the outcome of previous panels, however, it was not allowed to change the order of priority set by them. Moreover, the panel was asked to make recommendations concerning important subjects/topics, which were not covered by the received EoIs, but nevertheless were considered essential to fill gaps.

Next steps: expected calendar of events

Based on the work of the assessment panels in the various thematic areas, the Commission will now set up the Work Programmes and define the scope of the call for proposals. The document will be presented to the Programme Committee for approval in October 2002. Scientists who participated in the assessment may be listed in the document.

Provided that approval is obtained from the applicants, the abstracts of submitted EoIs, as well as the names of the experts who participated in the reviewing process, will be made public on the Internet to enhance transparency.

On condition that the programme is approved, the Commission envisages the following calendar of events:

November 2002: Conference on launch of FP6 and first call for proposals
February 2003: Deadline for submission of applications
End of 2003: First contracts

Questions raised at the consultation process

There were several questions raised by the Commission side concerning the consultation process. Did it represent an improvement over the past? What are the positive and negative features of the exercise? Did it serve its purpose?

The Commission had several options to set the process in motion; these included the consultation process through EoIs, the organisation of workshops to define the subjects/topics, as well as outside consultation.

Upon having evaluated the options the Commission decided to go for the first alternative, since this was expected to engage an important part of the scientific community. Indeed, the Commission succeeded; the response was overwhelming to the extent that they were unable to acknowledge receipt of the applications, as had been promised originally.

There has always been considerable dissatisfaction with the evaluation process used in the past but this time it may be different, as there is a clear determination from the Commission side to give high priority to scientific excellence. Steps will be taken to speed up and lighten the rather bureaucratic procedure for signing and handling contracts, and there will be

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0014-5793/02/$22.00 © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science B.V. on behalf of the Federation of European Biochemical Societies.
PII: S0014-5793(02)03351-3

no micromanagement, as the Commission will step back in the control of the project, by transferring the responsibility to the manager of the programme.

From now on you may only have your fellow scientists to blame if your application does not make it to the funding stage.

There are, however, some aspects that in my opinion should be improved in the future if the current EoI procedure is to be adhered to again. My main concern relates to the fact that not all of the member countries' applicants/representatives/reviewers understood what was expected from an EoI. This, I believe, may have placed some groups in a disadvantaged position, especially those that included large constellations of scientists and resources. Also, I would argue that having panels with a broad-based expertise might not be the best way to proceed in the future, as there were several occasions where I felt that more concrete expertise might have been necessary. Fortunately, the first call is for the first two years, and the exercise may be open again in two years time. As such, by learning from the first experience, most scientists will be given a second chance.

Implications of the consultation process

One of the most important outcomes of the exercise is the fact that there is just not enough money available in FP6 to reach the goal of structuring research in the life sciences in Europe. For example, in the area 1.1.1.1 'Fundamental knowledge and basic tools for functional genomics in all organisms', which covered gene expression and proteomics, structural genomics, comparative genomics and population genetics, bioinformatics, and multidisciplinary functional genomics approaches to basic biological process, there may be sufficient funds to grant only five IPs and three NoEs in the first call. For 2004 we expect three IPs and two NoEs. This is clearly far from what is needed to remain at the cutting edge of technology, in a field which is exploding and which is in great need of infrastructure. Both the USA and Japan are making very important investments in the area, and I – taking the current funding situation into context – can only foresee a widening of the gap, which is already painfully evident.

In order to close this gap between Europe and major competitors, the leaders of the European Union (EU) at the summit in Barcelona this year agreed to increase the R&D and innovation in the Union to approach 3% of GDP by year 2010. Two thirds of this amount should come from the private sector. This is a very welcome development, although many will argue that by 2010 the gap may be too large to be filled irrespective of how much money is put into the system. We live in a time where technology and machines become obsolete soon after they have been developed, and our best students have a tendency to look at the USA as the place of choice, to develop their potential.

Today there is much talk about the possibility of creating a European Research Council. The European Science Foundation (ESF), the European Molecular Biology Conference (EMBC), as well as other organisations have manifested interest in debating the initiative, and Denmark, which holds the Presidency of the EU, has taken the lead by organising a conference in partnership with ESF on the subject (Copenhagen on October 7 and 8). Needless to say, the scientific community awaits with great expectation the outcome of such discussions.

We are in desperate need to enter into a dialogue with science policy makers and politicians to ensure that we optimise the use of the resources. To compete we need a vision and a strategy that takes into account long-term funding as well as the career development of the next generation of scientists.

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